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Council members question \$1.6M bridge

Elrich calls plan 'ridiculous'

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

The Montgomery County Council had its own "bridge to nowhere" discussion Tuesday, when some members questioned spending \$1.6 million on a bridge to the Long Branch Library.

Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park called the project "ridiculous" and said spending on the bridge — once envisioned as a pedestrian passageway — has gotten out of control because of enhanced standards that have been put in place since the bridge was proposed about four years ago.

The proposed bridge is 10 feet wide and 170 feet long, according to Roylene Roberts, chief of neighborhood revitalization. She said a 374-foot-long blacktop trail also is included in the plans.

The bridge could accommodate emergency vehicles, such as fire trucks, Elrich said.

"You need to build a bridge across the street, and you end up building the Woodrow Wilson Bridge," Elrich said in an interview.

The bridge discussion was part of a larger conversation on County Executive Isiah Leggett's (D) proposed capital budget, which includes \$3.9 billion in funding for capital projects in fiscal years 2011-2016.

After questions arose Tuesday over the bridge, council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park pulled the item from deliberation and tabled it until the council again takes up the capital budget. Floreen said that could be next week.

"Welcome to the frustration of trying to get something done around here," Floreen said referring to the council questions regarding the bridge spending.

The bridge is to replace an existing wood-planked bridge that links the Long Branch Community Center to the library.

Funding for the bridge comes from federal grants, but council members said if the project doesn't make sense, then that money should be spent on other projects.

When the bridge was proposed four years ago it was projected to cost about \$1 million, said Richard Y. Nelson Jr., director of the county's Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

The bridge was originally conceived as a small-scale pedestrian passage similar to what is there now, he said.

However, because the bridge crossed parkland owned by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, there was an added requirement that it meet the American Society of Transportation Officials standards — meaning that it was changed to a more costly 10-foot-wide design.

However, in order to receive extra federal funding — \$742,500 — the county is required to comply with the State Highway Administration's interpretation of Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, which added additional costs.

If the bridge and trail project proceeds as planned, it would be completed in November 2011.

It also was revealed that the county had paid the county's Department of Permitting Services \$120,000 in expenses related to planning for the bridge.

Elrich compared that to the county taking money from one fund and putting it in another.

"I have to say that none of this makes any sense," he said.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park described the spending as "silly and excessive," but said it made sense to move forward with the bridge and trail because the county had secured federal funding for the construction.

"If we said, 'Send it back; we don't want it,' there's no guarantee that it would come back to Montgomery County," he said.

However, Elrich said that just because the county has dug itself a hole doesn't mean it had to keep digging.

He suggested giving up the federal funds, which could be spent on a worthwhile project in the county or elsewhere.